
UNIT 11 GENDER AND ENVIRONMENT

Structure

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11.0 OBJECTIVES

After perusing this Unit, you will know:

How environmental issues and concerns are different for men and women and ‘gendered’ relationship with environment;

Conceptual difference between “sex” and “gender”;

How environmental degradation impacts women more than men;

Material and ideological aspects of ‘gendered’ relationship with ecology;

About Ecofeminism in general and Indian Ecofeminism in particular;

Critiques of Ecofeminism; and

Concept of Feminist Environmentalism.

11.1 INTRODUCTION

Does the term ‘environment’ mean same thing for everyone? Do all human beings, groups and societies have same concerns regarding environment? Or are environmental issues and concerns different for different groups of people? In this Unit we will try and examine this question.

11.2 INTERRELATION OF GENDER AND ENVIRONMENT

From previous Units that you have studied so far you may already have understood that when historians and other social scientists examine issues of environment they employ tools of analysis that are different from that of other experts such as physical scientists. These tools are basically analytical categories that have been devised by social scientists, such as caste, class, gender, race, region and so on. This is because social scientists do not view questions of environment in isolation, rather they see them in relation to human society. As a result, concerns that are most relevant to social scientists are about modes through which human beings have been adapting to their environment and to changes thereof, ways and means in which human societies have been impacting environment, manner in which environment has been affecting human lives etc.

Now we all know that human society, at any given point of time or space, cannot be treated as homogenous category, but as one that is diverse and layered with hierarchies and embedded inequalities. These inequalities mostly result from unequal distribution of power within society which, in, turn results in unequal access to resources including environmental resources. It would logically follow from this that relationship between human society and environment cannot be uniform or universal. Our response to environment, in terms of interventions and adaptations as well as impact of environmental change and degradation upon us, vary on basis of our location within social matrix or social hierarchies of which we are a part. For example, environmental issues of third world would be different from those of the first world, those of the poor would be different from those of the rich, those of urban areas would be different from those of rural areas and concerns of agricultural communities, nomadic pastoralists and forest tribes would be vastly different from one another. Similarly, environmental concerns of men and women have also been found to be vastly different. In other words, our relationship with environment is “gendered” and that is what forms the subject of discussion in this Unit. This means that while we shall certainly explore the relationship that women have with environment, this discussion is not merely about women and environment. We propose to go further than that by using the concept of gender.

11.3 WHAT IS GENDER?

Before we proceed any further, we need to have some idea of what

we mean by the term ‘gender’, which is often confused with ‘sex’. While sex is a biologically derived identity based on reproductive organs etc., gender refers to social and cultural differences between men and women. These differences are based on learned behaviour, responses and expectations that are associated with being male or female in any given cultural context. Gender is symbolically constructed. This means that each culture produces a universe of meanings and

symbols pertaining to issue of gender within which both men and women function. Hence men and women are not universal or fixed categories operating in history according to fixed biological determinants. An important aspect of gender relations is power, such that operation of gender produced hierarchies of meaning and value. Let us consider an example. Many cultures across time and space have tended to associate reproductive roles such as nurturing children, cooking, cleaning and other domestic activities with women and productive roles such as working on farms and factories or other income-generating activities outside of household with men. However while doing so, same cultures often ascribe greater value to latter than former. Very often we tend to assume that this is based on some objective computation of value, though actual assessment has often revealed that non-monetized domestic work may be of equal or greater value than monetized 'productive' work. Hence, our assumption of greater and lesser value is clearly based on silent and imperceptible operation of gender norms which creates such hierarchies.

Let us now begin to explore 'gendered' relationship with environment. We will discuss this relationship in terms of two dimensions:

- 1) Material
- 2) Ideological

Though interconnected, we will treat these aspects separately, to begin with, for greater conceptual clarity.

11.4 MATERIAL CONCERNS

Natural environment that surrounds us is a major component of material world in which we live and environmental destruction is an important part of that material reality. As has already been mentioned above, impact of environmental destruction is greater on marginal groups, communities and occupations than on the more rich, privileged and powerful. However, according to Anil Agarwal, a prominent environmental scholar from India, maximum impact is felt by women across all rural areas and especially by women from poor landless, marginal and small farm families. In fact, in his opinion, seen from the point of view of such women it can be argued that all development is ignorant of women's needs and perhaps even anti-women. He says that 'progress' is often at the cost of increasing women's work burden. Let us try to make sense of the above by beginning with concrete and very basic fact from most parts of rural India. Traditional notions of division of labour within household put

the onus of collecting fuel, fodder and water for all domestic needs primarily on women. They are expected to gather these from surrounding natural resources. More degraded the environment, longer and more tedious is the search. In more arid and semi-arid areas of the country it has been found that women are forced to spend nearly five to six hours and in some cases even up to 10 hours daily to gather these basic resources without which they cannot even begin their day's domestic chores such as cooking, cleaning and tending to livestock, besides working on agricultural fields. In contrast, in areas with comparatively rich

natural vegetation cover the burden of work on women is relatively lighter. A good example is Kerala where land reforms have also contributed to this besides a rich green cover. Almost each rural household has access to few dozen coconut trees at very least, making it much easier to meet fuel requirements. In areas of reduced availability of biomass vastly increased work burden of women has had adverse impact on all aspects of their lives, primarily healthcare. Women mostly do not have time to seek medical care or rest in illness. Even pregnant women are forced to work for 14 hours a day right until the time of delivery, a schedule they are forced to return to within merely few days of childbirth.

It is fairly obvious from above example how environmental degradation has more direct impact on women than on men. Besides deforestation, another factor that has contributed to above situation has been forest laws that have played adverse role by severely restricting access to forest resources. Another crucial factor has been penetration of cash economy. This has affected relationship between men and women and their respective relationships with nature in strange ways. While men have become involved with cash economy, women continue to be part of a non-monetized, biomass-based subsistence economy. Tragic consequence of this dichotomy within household is that men are often more than willing to destroy same natural resources for earning cash that women of their own household depend on for household needs like fuel and fodder. In Agarwal's opinion new attitudes towards nature generated by penetration of cash economy have even resulted in men's psychological alienation from their ecosystem. As a result, even when it comes to rehabilitating local village ecosystem by planting trees that would help to meet many of crucial requirements of the household men have mostly shown little interest. Employment for men usually means work that generates cash income. Even when such employment is not available men tend to do little to enrich local ecosystem. The phenomenon of mass male migration from rural areas to towns and cities to look for jobs is also an outcome of this understanding that household needs can be met only by earning cash. This leaves already overburdened women with increased workload, since work in agricultural field also now has to be taken care of by women alone in absence of men. Of course, the need for cash in poor rural households is a real one. However,

cash earned by men who migrate to urban areas is mostly of such meagre value, most of it being spent on their own needs while living in cities, that it never suffices for household needs. In contrast, women continue to meet vital household needs by sourcing necessities which can still be collected as 'free' goods from surrounding natural environment. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that women's participation in programmes of afforestation has been found to be most enthusiastic. Despite their grueling work schedules of 14 to 16 hours a day women have been extremely keen to contribute in such programmes, especially in tree planting, often having to fight off obstacles created by men. Afforestation programmes that have had men's participation have mostly been those with cash motive such as social forestry programmes centred around plantation of eucalyptus and other commercially important species. Even though such programmes have been hailed as great successes by World Bank, since they have

yielded rich cash benefits, these have often had detrimental impact in long term on surrounding ecosystem, for example in case of eucalyptus trees which result in drastic depletion of ground water. No wonder then that 'male trees' and 'female trees' are terms that are common part of vocabulary amongst activist groups involved in environmental regeneration.

11.5 IDEOLOGICAL ASPECTS: ECOFEMINISM

With discussion on material aspects as background let us proceed to explore ideological aspects of this relationship and debates thereof. Environmental historian Donald Worster explains that nature figures in human existence not just as objective material reality but also as ideas, meanings, thoughts and feelings. It is important to understand ways in which individuals and societies have imagined nature across time and space, since our attitudes and behaviour towards environment and ways in which we act upon it have crucial linkages with it. This holds good even in era of modern science since, as he says, scientists "do not work in complete isolation from their societies but reflect in their models of nature their societies, modes of production, human relations, culture's needs and values.". He, therefore, considers it worthwhile for scholars of environmental history to undertake an examination of ideas as "ecological agents".

Unlike in India and other parts of Third World, relationship between gender and environment has been conceptualized mainly in ideological terms under the umbrella of ecofeminism in West, particularly United States. In this section we will examine main arguments that have been put forward by proponents of ecofeminism and disagreements between them.

In Ecofeminist formulation relationship that men and women have with nature have been located in realm of

perception, ideas and imagination. While discussing different ways in which environment is conceptualized by different people depending on their location in social matrix Worster says, "men and women, set apart almost everywhere into more or less distinctive spheres, have arrived at different ways of regarding nature, sometimes radically so". This precisely is what enquiry of ecofeminists is all about:

- 1) ways in which men and women conceptualize nature,
- 2) ways in which imagination about nature itself is gendered in patriarchal thought, and
- 3) impact of such imagination upon lives of women and on nature.

Expressed in broad, general terms ecofeminism locates exploitation of nature within ideological fabric of patriarchal social structure. It also points to manner in which subjugation of women as well as that of nature is expressed and justified in very similar rhetorical terms that are part of the vocabulary of patriarchal

discourse. Hence, according to ecofeminists it logically follows that feminist movement must align itself with environmental movement in such a manner that its struggle against patriarchy becomes an expression of emancipation not just of women but also of nature.

It would be useful to look at Bina Agarwal's summary of central ideas within western ecofeminist discourse. It may serve as useful starting point to enter the debate. These ideas, paraphrased from her essay, are as follows:

- There are important correlations between domination and oppression of women and domination and exploitation of nature;
- In patriarchal imagination women are seen as embodying elements of 'nature' while men represent 'culture';
- Since nature-culture binary is understood in hierarchical terms where culture is superior to nature, women by same logic are seen as inferior to men;
- Owing to this close relationship between domination of women and domination of nature women have special responsibility and even a stake in ending domination of nature, "in healing the alienated human and non-human nature";
- In any case since feminist movement and environmental movement both stand for egalitarian, non-hierarchical systems besides having many other values in common, it logically follows that they need to work together to evolve a common perspective, theory and practice.

Ecofeminism represents a set of theoretical formulations as well as a movement. History of Ecofeminism is, therefore, to be found in its writings and wide range of women's involvement in environmental issues and grassroots struggles around the world.

For better understanding of ideas and debates it embodies we need to trace brief history of its origin and development. Ecofeminist movement emerged in mid-70s and had crucial linkages with second wave Feminist movement as well as environmental movement or Green movement that had begun in 60s. It was inspired by concern of Green movement about impact of human activities upon non-human world. From feminist movement it imbibed its critique of women's subordination and oppression in patriarchy. By combining these concerns ecofeminists challenged both mainstream feminism which until then had lacked an environmental perspective as well as mainstream Green politics which had failed to take into account gendered nature of humankind's relationship with environment.

The decade of 70s was very interesting time in this context. French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne who founded Ecology- Feminism (Ecologie-Féminisme) Center in Paris in 1972 perhaps for the first time used the term ecofeminisme in 1974. This was followed by series of significant developments. In 1974 a conference was organized in Berkeley, California by geographers Sandra Marburg and Lisa Watkins entitled "Woman and Environment". Around the

same time interconnections between women and nature, feminism and ecology were also being made in scholarly works of Sherry Ortner, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Susan Griffin, and Carolyn Merchant. Ecofeminism also began to make its way into courses developed around this time such as one by Ynestra King at Institute for Social Ecology in Vermont around 1976.

1980 became a crucial year in early history of ecofeminism. This was the year of a major conference that King and others organized on “Women and Life on Earth: Ecofeminism in the 80s”, followed by 1980 Women’s Pentagon Action in which around 2000 women encircled the Pentagon to protest anti-life nuclear war and weapons development. These events led to shaping of a vibrant movement around ideas of ecofeminism through the decade of 1980s, marked by series of significant developments in realms of both scholarship and activism around the world. The movement continued well into 90s and ever since then numerous books and newsletters continue to appear and conferences and environmental actions have taken place around the world based on understanding of women’s connections to nature and environment.

Ecofeminists have advocated some form of environmental ethics that deals with domination of women and nature through an ethic of care and nurture, love and trust that arises out of women’s culturally constructed experiences rather than a traditional ethic based on rights, rules and utilities. In words of philosopher Karen Warren, “An ecofeminist ethic is both a critique of male

domination of both women and nature and an attempt to frame an ethic free of male-gender bias about women and nature. It not only recognizes multiple voices of women located differently by race, class, age, [and] ethnic considerations, it centralizes those voices. Ecofeminism builds on multiple perspectives of those whose perspectives are typically omitted or undervalued in dominant discourses, for example Chipko women, in developing a global perspective on role of male domination in exploitation of women and nature. An ecofeminist perspective is thereby . . . structurally pluralistic, inclusivist and contextualist, emphasizing through concrete example the crucial role context plays in understanding sexist and naturist practice.”

Though this has been broad common ground for ecofeminists, there are significant divergences too. Inspired by western feminist politics as it was, ecofeminism has divergent strands that reflect different positions within the movement itself, such as:

- 1) Liberal,
- 2) Cultural,
- 3) Socialist and others.

Carolyn Merchant provides brief summary of these positions as follows:

“Liberal ecofeminism is consistent with objectives of reform environmentalism to alter human relations with nature from within existing structures of governance

through passage of new laws and regulations. Cultural ecofeminism ... analyzes environmental problems from within a critique of patriarchy and offers alternatives that could liberate both women and nature. Social and socialist ecofeminists ground their analyses in capitalist patriarchy. They ask how patriarchal relations of reproduction reveal domination of women by men and how capitalist relations of production reveal domination of nature by men. Domination of women and nature inherent in market economy's use of both as resources would be totally restructured. Although cultural ecofeminism has delved more deeply into woman-nature connection, social and socialist ecofeminism have potential for a more thorough critique of domination and for a liberating social justice."

Based on these divergent positions there are some important disagreements amongst ecofeminists. Let us try to draw an outline of some of significant points of debate within ecofeminist discourse. Some of these are also points around which critiques of ecofeminism have come up. One such important point is ethic of care that critics as well as some ecofeminists themselves point out, falls prey to essentialist idea that women's nature is to nurture. It has been argued that this assumption that women are more caring, more emotional and more nurturing than men and women are closer to nature while men are closer to culture is a patriarchal construct. It serves the purpose of keeping women subservient to men by relegating them to domestic sphere and reproductive roles, thereby perpetuating hierarchically organized division of labour. Thus, the argument that follows is that

if ecofeminists agree that women are close to nature and men to culture do they not accept and sanction their own oppression in a patriarchal society?

Some ecofeminists who drew linkages between women and nature based them on biology. Ariel Kay Salleh represents an extreme position on this. She grounds even women's consciousness in biology and nature. According to her,

"Women's monthly fertility cycle, tiring symbiosis of pregnancy, wrench of childbirth and pleasure of suckling an infant, these things already ground women's consciousness in knowledge of being coterminous with nature. However tacit or unconscious this identity may be for many women ... it is nevertheless a fact of life."

This according to Anne Archambault is "body-based argument" to which some ecofeminists subscribe. In contrast with this she says there are ecofeminists who represent "oppression argument" which is "based on the belief that women's separate social reality, resulting from sexual division of labour and associated oppression, has led women to develop special insight and connection with nature". Ecofeminists such as Ynestra King and Carolyn Merchant fall in this category since they do not agree with nature-culture dichotomy and see it as a patriarchal ideological construct which is then used to maintain gender hierarchy. However, they do accept the view that women are ideologically constructed as

closer to nature because of their biology and this construct, albeit a product of patriarchy, has led to shaping of women's consciousness over time such that they do indeed feel closer to nature. Thus, even while recognizing that association between women and nature has historically been used to exploit them such ecofeminists chose to embrace this connection and make it the basis for their critique of patriarchal oppression of women and nature.

However, nature-culture divide is not universal across all cultures, nor is there uniformity in meaning attributed to "nature", "culture", "male" and "female" as pointed out by critics of ecofeminism. Studies in social anthropology as well as historical studies have shown that concepts such as nature, culture, gender etc. are historically and socially constructed and vary across and within cultures and time periods. Ecofeminists have been critiqued for treating patriarchy as static, unvarying condition as well as ideological constructs connecting women and nature as timeless.

One significant exception in this regard is Carolyn Merchant who attempts a historical analysis. She traces shifts over time in manner in which people have imagined nature. She identifies two divergent and contrary ideas about nature that coexisted in premodern Europe and became basis for conceptual connection between women and nature.

First was that of nature, especially earth as nurturing mother. This was the more dominant image and it served to set limits to human exploitation of nature. In her own words, "One does not readily slay a mother, dig into her entrails for gold or mutilate her body...". The opposing image was of nature as wild woman, tempestuous and uncontrollable, which could render violence, storms, droughts and general chaos. This image culturally-sanctioned human control and dominance over nature. Such ways of imagining nature as an organic and feminine entity came to an end, according to Merchant, between 16th and 17th centuries with the coming of Scientific Revolution and growth of market economy in Europe. It was replaced by a mechanistic worldview in which nature was conceived as a machine or inanimate resource meant to serve needs of humankind. This removed all moral dilemma regarding mastery and control of nature by humans. She observes, "In investigating roots of our current environmental dilemma and its connections to science, technology and economy we must reexamine formation of a world view and a science that, by reconceptualizing reality as a machine rather than a living organism, sanctioned domination of both nature and women". In this manner she has attempted to historicize ideological constructs that patriarchal society has produced at different points of time.

Indeed, the idea of patriarchy itself as a uniform system and practice, that manifests in same manner across time and space, has been contested by historians of gender such as Joan Scott and others from mid-1980s onwards. Instead, it has been suggested that patriarchy needs to be studied as a dynamic system rather than as one which is static and unvarying across time and space. Similarly, women's experience of patriarchal oppression cannot be understood as universal.

In this regard there are two points of criticism faced by ecofeminists that are relevant here.

First of these criticisms is that ecofeminists have failed to differentiate among women by class, race, ethnicity etc., thus ignoring forms of domination, other than gender, even though these have crucial bearings on women's position. Positing "woman" as unitary category, without considering these intersectionalities is, therefore, a problematic prospect and leads to 'essentialism'. It has been argued that much of ecofeminist theory has been based on experiences of women in western world, often failing to take into account those of women elsewhere, particularly in Third World. As a response to this, ecofeminists in non-western world have attempted to formulate theoretical perspectives based on their own specific cultural contexts.

11.6 INDIAN ECOFEMINISM

A significant intervention is by Vandana Shiva who

presents a Third World perspective of ecofeminism. She agrees with other ecofeminists that in patriarchal society violence against women is similar to violence against nature and this is shaped to a large extent by ideological constructs about both. However, she puts forward an 'Indian imagination' of nature or traditional Indian cosmological view of nature as Prakriti, as "activity and diversity" and as "an expression of Shakti, the feminine and creative principle of the cosmos" which "in conjunction with masculine principle (Purusha) ... creates the world". She agrees with Carolyn Merchant that modern industrial era had transformed human imagination about nature in a way that facilitated rapacious exploitation of nature by mankind. In context of India she argued that agent of such transformation had been the colonial state. Image of nature as earth-mother and idea of a harmonious relationship between man and nature gave way to notion of man as separate from and dominating over inert and passive nature, according to her. She states, "Viewed from perspective of nature or women embedded in nature this transformation was a violent and disruptive one. For women ... the death of Prakriti is simultaneously a beginning of their marginalization, devaluation, displacement and ultimate dispensability. The ecological crisis is, at its root, the death of feminine principle ...". However, she goes beyond ideological constructs to explore connections between women and nature in material world by examining heavy dependence that rural women in Third World have on natural resources for daily sustenance and survival. Thus, she talks about how destruction of nature in this context has direct and damaging impact on lives of women. She also discusses special knowledge of nature that such women possess. Their dependence on nature and their detailed knowledge about it makes relationship between these women and nature an intimate one indeed. She observes that this relationship has been seriously undermined with advent of modern science. In particular, women's knowledge has been systematically undervalued and marginalized. In her words, "Modern reductionist

science like development turns out to be a patriarchal project which has excluded women as experts and simultaneously excluded ecology and holistic ways of knowing which understand and respect nature's processes and interconnectedness as science."

Though her work is of critical importance in expanding ecofeminist argument beyond Western experience there are problems with her formulation. Bina Agarwal while critiquing her points out that while her empirical evidence is drawn mostly from her work with rural women primarily from northwest India, including women activists of Chipko movement, she projects her generalizations onto all Third World women, lumping them into one category. In doing so she, too, fails to differentiate between

women of different classes, castes, races, ecological zones and so on, hence making hers an essentialist argument too. Another idea that has met with criticism is her sweeping generalization of cosmic conception of creation of the world through harmonious conjunction of Prakriti and Purusha for entire subcontinent. This is a problematic idea, given the vast population and infinite cultural and religious diversity of India. Concrete processes and institutions in material life that produced and transformed these ideological conceptions have also not been identified.

Another problem that Agarwal points out is that Shiva attributes sole agency for breakdown of harmonious relationship between nature and human society in India to colonialism and consequent imposition of Western science and Western model of development. According to Agarwal, though colonial experience in all of Third World has certainly been disruptive economically, politically, culturally and above all, ecologically; it cannot be ignored that this process impinged on preexisting bases of economic and social (including gender) inequalities.

Second thing that ecofeminists have been critiqued for is ignoring critical aspects of material life and their relationship with constructs about women and nature. It has been pointed out that there is need to pay close attention to details of specific historical contexts such as gendered division of labour, uneven distribution of property and power and other such material aspects of production and reproduction. Ecofeminists, particularly those from cultural or spiritual feminist background tend to emphasize the role of ideology to exclusion of everything else. This is not to deny the importance of ideas, imagination or ideology. It is true that patriarchal social systems perpetuate themselves through continuous production and transformation of an elaborate edifice of symbols, metaphors, rituals, practices, beliefs and ideas, including constructs about women and nature that ecofeminists speak about. However, these symbols and constructs acquire meaning only with reference to specific social, economic and political structures within which these are produced. As Donald Worster says 'mental culture' does not spring up all on its own, since ideas are socially constructed and, therefore, reflect organization of those societies that produce them, including their relations of production and hierarchies of power. It wouldn't be fair to say that all ecofeminists ignore material connections. In general, ecofeminists from socialist

feminist background tend to stress historical and contextual basis of connection between women and nature. They see gendered division of labour and power as holding the key to unsustainable patterns of development that harms both women and nature. Carolyn Merchant who is known for her historical approach emphasizes the need for analysis of relations of production and reproduction in relation to ecology. In her view this helps to delineate shifts of power and consequent changes in forms of patriarchy in different societies.

In recent times new scholarship from Third World has substantially enriched our perspective on questions of gender and environment. Bina Agarwal's contribution is of critical importance in this regard. She has stressed the need for analysis of structural causes of environmental degradation, its effects and responses to it in order to formulate a strategy for reversal of existing situation. She is critical of ecofeminist argument that locates violence against women and nature mainly in ideological constructs produced by patriarchal social systems. According to her, if patriarchal constructs are to be challenged then there is need to evolve a theoretical understanding of what could be termed "the political economy of ideological construction". On the basis of this she poses an alternative framework to understand issues of gender and environment which she terms "feminist environmentalism".

An overview of her main arguments in her own words is as follows:

"... women's and men's relationship with nature needs to be understood as rooted in their material reality, in their specific forms of interaction with environment. Hence, in so far as there is a gender and class (/caste/race)-based division of labor and distribution of property and power, gender and class (/caste/race) structure people's interactions with nature and so structure effects of environmental change on people and their responses to it. And where knowledge about nature is experiential in its basis divisions of labor, property and power which shape experience also shape knowledge based on that experience In this conceptualization, therefore, link between women and environment can be seen as structured by a given gender and class (/caste/race) organization of production, reproduction and distribution. Ideological constructions such as of gender, nature and relationship between the two may be seen as (interactively) a part of this structuring but not whole of it. This perspective I term "feminist environmentalism"."

She presents above hypothesis on basis of a wide range of data collected from diverse regions and sub-regions of India. After analyzing this data, she has identified factors that have caused reduction or loss of access of rural poor to natural resources required for their survival. She discusses critical importance of common property resources for survival of rural poor in India and explores how systematic degradation of such environmental resources, for example reduction of forest cover, deterioration of soil quality, depletion of water resources and so on affect lives of rural people, in particular the poor and marginalized. She also speaks about other factors responsible for decreasing access to community

resources such as expanding control of state and appropriation by private agents. She also discusses factors such as:

- 1) undermining of traditional institutions for community management of resources,
- 2) continuous pressure of expanding population on limited resources, and
- 3) erosion of traditional and local knowledge systems related to agriculture.

She then goes on to examine class-gender effects of all of the above factors and finds that while maximum hardships are faced by poor households, it is indeed women and female children of poor peasant and tribal households who are most adversely affected. Reason for this has been identified as already existing gender-based inequalities within household itself with regard to:

- 1) division of labour;
- 2) distribution of subsistence-based resources, primarily food and healthcare;
- 3) access to productive resources and technology;
- 4) position in labour market;
- 5) employment opportunities;
- 6) occupational mobility;
- 7) access to training; and so on.

Given these inequalities, Agarwal assesses impact on women of reduced access to natural resources. She finds that it has degraded quality of life of such women in various ways such as:

- 1) increased number of working hours in a day,
- 2) reduced income levels,
- 3) poor nutrition and health care, and
- 4) breakdown of social support networks.

Some of these issues have been the cause for increasing domestic discord and even suicide. Undermining and erosion of women's indigenous knowledge and their marginalization by modern science and technology is another important casualty noted by her.

She finally proceeds to study varieties of responses to this crisis, including that of state as well as different groups of stakeholders. In this she finds response of the state to be flawed and inadequate. Of complex variety of responses of non-state actors, she finds response of rural women to be most noteworthy and reason for

hope. She notes their enthusiastic participation in movements for ecological regeneration and their most meaningful and constructive perspective and understanding of such issues. On basis of this she urges us to see women not merely as victims of environmental degradation, poor state policy etc. but rather, as important actors trying to bring about positive transformation.

Even though Agarwal's work is based entirely on data from India, aspects of material reality such as patterns of subsistence and social relations, being somewhat similar across large parts of Third World, her findings may have implications beyond India. Her theoretical formulation of "Feminist Environmentalism", thus, stands out as one of most viable alternatives to understand critical issues of women and environment today.

Check Your Progress Exercise

1) What do you understand by the term Ecofeminism?

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2) Fill in the blanks:

a) While sex is _____ derived identity based on reproductive organs etc., gender refers to _____ differences between men and women.

b) In _____ land reforms have contributed to light burden of work on women besides a _____. Almost each rural household has access to few dozen coconut trees at very least, making it much easier to meet _____ requirements.

c) Relationship between gender and environment has been conceptualized mainly in ideological terms under the umbrella of _____ in West, particularly _____.

d) Some ecofeminists like Ariel Kay Salleh draw linkages between women and nature by based them on biology. She grounds even women's _____ in biology and nature. According to her, "Women's monthly fertility cycle, tiring symbiosis of pregnancy, wrench of childbirth and pleasure of suckling an infant, these things already ground women's consciousness in knowledge of being coterminous with nature."

e) Vandana Shiva puts forward an _____ of nature or traditional Indian cosmological view of nature as _____, as “activity and diversity” and as “an expression of Shakti, the feminine and creative principle of the cosmos” which “in conjunction with masculine principle (_____) ... creates the world”.

11.7 SUMMARY

In this Unit you learnt how gender and environment are correlated. We explored the relationship women have with ecology but the discussion was not merely about women and environment. Men also came under its purview. We discussed how maximum impact of environmental degradation is felt by women, particularly those from rural, poor, landless, marginal, tribal or small-farm households. Progress and development are often coterminous with increasing women’s burden in various ways. For instance, the onus of collecting fuel, fodder and water is on women that they do from their surrounding natural resources and environmental depletion may lead them to work even harder to procure these. This is why women’s active involvement and participation in environmental movements like Chipko has been more than that of men. In a patriarchal society violence against and subjugation of women is similar to damage to environment and that is shaped and informed by ideological constructs of both “men” and “women”.

11.8 KEY WORDS

Cash economy: An economic system, or part of one, in which financial transactions are carried out in cash rather than via direct debit, standing order, bank transfer or credit card.

Green Movement: It aims and helps to make the world a better place by collaborating with other businesses. Its main goal is to have clean water and abundant energy, reduce carbon footprint, and reduce waste stream.

11.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISE

1) Consult Sections 11.5 and 11.6

2) a) biologically, social and cultural; b) Kerala, rich natural vegetation cover, fuel; c) Ecofeminism, United States; d) consciousness; e) ‘Indian imagination’, Prakriti, Purusha.

11.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

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